PART I

Literary Contexts

CHAPTER 1

Hughes and His Contemporaries

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The complexity of Hughes's early poetic contexts has been occluded by a somewhat polarised critical sense of the 1950s in which the work of the Movement poets, frequently represented by Philip Larkin, is seen to have been challenged by the poets of Al Alvarez's anthology, *The New Poetry* (1962). Alvarez's introductory essay, subtitled, 'Beyond the Gentility Principle', appeared to offer Hughes's poetry as an antidote to Larkin's work, which he nevertheless also included in *The New Poetry*. John Goodby argues that actually Hughes 'did not so much "revolt against" the Movement so much as precede it, and continue regardless of it in extending English poetry's radical-dissident strain'.[1] Goodby's case is based upon the early influences upon Hughes's poetry of D. H. Lawrence,[2] Robert Graves[3] and Dylan Thomas. In the latter case, for example, Goodby argues that 'Hughes's quarrying of Thomas went beyond verbal resemblances to shared intellectual co-ordinates that include the work of Schopenhauer and the Whitehead-influenced "process poetic" forged by Thomas in 1933–34'.[4] Ted Hughes's supervisor at Cambridge, Doris Wheatley, 'confessed that she had learned more from him about Dylan Thomas than he had learned from her about John Donne'.[5]

In a literal sense, the contemporaries of Ted Hughes are those who lived at the same time as Hughes – that is, from 1930 to 1998. The earliest of that group would include those who influenced him, like Thomas and Graves, both of whom spoke at Cambridge around the time that Hughes was there,[6] and those in the famous photograph of the Faber poets. In that picture, about the time *Lupercal* was published in 1960, Ted Hughes stands to the left of Louis MacNeice and to the right of T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden and Stephen Spender. It can also include Sylvia Plath, who was so central to his life and poetry. Hughes also helped many young poets and translators, male and female, including those with whom he was close personally. Although private, Hughes served the public world of poetry as Poet Laureate, with his translations and with work in the theatre, for instance,

with Peter Brook. Hughes was close with Thom Gunn, a fine poet, who also studied at Cambridge. Younger poets, such as Seamus Heaney (b. 1939) and Craig Raine (b. 1944), also describe the effect Hughes had on them in so many ways. This chapter will concentrate on those nearly contemporary with him, three poets born within a decade of Hughes: Philip Larkin (1922–85), Thom Gunn (1929–2004) and Seamus Heaney (1939–2013). Of these fine poets, the first came to regard himself as perhaps a rival, and the other two fellow poets were supportive over the long haul of Hughes's life.

This chapter will take its cue from Hughes himself and will assume that poetry matters more than personal feeling for fellow poets. Reading Hughes's letters in the British Library, one gets a sense of Hughes's commitment to his poetry in and of itself and not as something explainable or reducible to his life. In a letter of April 1969, Hughes tells Keith Sagar, in his first letter to the pioneer in the study of Hughes's poetry, 'it is a great change to read an article that concerns itself with the imaginative and vital interior of poetry' (*PC* 22). For Hughes, as for Gerard Manley Hopkins, the inscape or inner expression of poetry is vital. He thinks that biography and life get in the way of that interiority, as he says to Sagar in a later letter: 'Whatever person I've projected, in the body of my poems, will have to bear whatever ideas people have about him' (*PC* 25). Hughes wished for readers not to focus on his life, but that wish was seldom granted, although Sagar respected Hughes's wishes in this regard.

Hughes also saw translation as central to expanding English poetry, so his work on Vasko Popa, Miroslav Holub, Zbigniew Herbert and Yehuda Amichai (not to mention on Samuel Beckett) is vital even when considering Hughes in relation to the contemporaries Larkin, Gunn and Heaney.[7] Hughes had a wide and deep view of poetry, steeped in the classics, in nature, in Europe and the world, and not one limited to Englishness. Unlike Philip Larkin, who, along with others from the Movement poets, was sceptical about Europe, Hughes thought European poetry to be important. With Daniel Weissbort, Hughes edited the first ten issues of *Modern Poetry in Translation* (1965–71).[8] Whereas in 1964 Larkin could tell an interviewer that he did not read foreign poetry,[9] Hughes sought 'first-hand contact – however fumbled and broken' (*ST* 201) with the poets of other languages.

In 1977, Larkin and Hughes were both asked to write four lines each to commemorate the Queen's Silver Jubilee, and these verses were set in the pavement in Queen's Square outside the offices of Faber & Faber. Hughes celebrated the Crown for keeping the soul of the nation whole.[10]

In sending his own contribution to Charles Monteith, Chairman of Faber & Faber, Larkin added that 'I'm sure Ted will do better' and provided in his letter a wicked satire on Larkin's own official verse for the occasion and on the occasion itself, which is in the line of Dryden, Pope and Swift.[11] In 1984, Larkin had turned down the Poet Laureate's post, which allowed Hughes to take it up. Larkin was cynical about poets like Hughes who drew upon what Larkin called 'a common Myth-kitty'.[12] Moreover, in *Selected Letters*, Larkin was dismissive of Hughes as a poet, whereas, as Neil Roberts points out, Hughes tended to be generous about Larkin as a poet, although sadly disappointed in the man, especially after reading the remarks in Larkin's letters.[13]

In those letters it is difficult to find anything positive about Ted Hughes. In May 1967, Kingsley Amis had written Larkin and asked him to reassure him: 'Ted Hughes is As ABSOLUTELY DEVOID OF ANY KIND OF MERIT WHATSOEVER as his late wife [Sylvia Plath] was, isn't he? I mean he is, isn't he?'[14] Amis and Larkin are old friends who speak in a similar language, as can be seen in Larkin's statements in response to Amis's questions. In writing to Kingsley Amis in June 1967, Larkin says he looks forward to Amis's poems, saying that he is the best living poet except for two, although not the confessional poets Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton: 'No, of course Ted's no good at all. Not at all. Not a single solitary bit of good. I think his ex-wife, late wife, was *extraordinary*, though not necessarily likeable. Old Ted isn't even extraordinary'.[15] One can tell that Larkin delights in sharing his assessment of Hughes and in preferring Plath to Hughes. From Hull in 1975, Larkin writes to Charles Monteith, who was the editor for Gunn, Hughes and Larkin, and says that Ted was there for the first time since about 1962, filled the hall and received a great reception: 'I was in the chair, providing a sophisticated, insincere, effete, and gold-watch-chained alternative to his primitive forthright virile leather-jacketed *persona*'.[16] Larkin is satirical about himself in this contrast, as well as about Hughes, and the punctuation – the commas for his adjectival string about himself and none for that about Hughes – masterfully contrasts Larkin bound together with Hughes, bound in their reputations and masks as poets. Larkin may have had to show some restraint to their editor at Faber. To Robert Conquest, Larkin says that during the Ilkley Literature Festival, a woman both shrieked and vomited at Hughes's reading. 'I must say I've never felt like shrieking. We had the old crow over at Hull recently, looking like a Christmas present from Easter Island. He's all right when not reading!'[17] Larkin has a keen satirical eye and seems to enjoy setting the scene for fellow Movement poet Conquest. Larkin's back-handed

compliment for Hughes, set up by the reference to Hughes's famously craggy looks, hinges on the spikey irony that he is all right when he is not giving a poetry reading. The satirist Larkin liked to get in his swipes but did not like receiving them.[18] For Larkin, who had been a close friend of Amis and Conquest at Oxford, Hughes is part of an aesthetic tension between Oxford and Cambridge poets. Inadvertently, Larkin, even in his wry and satirical mode, draws attention to Hughes's generosity to other poets and his own lack in that regard. James Booth, an authority on Larkin, notes that although in March 1979 Hughes invited Larkin to be a judge for the Arvon competition and said that he wanted to write Larkin a fan letter after reading 'Aubade', Larkin, in his letter to Winifred Bradshaw (née Arnott), made fun of Hughes, who was giving a reading at Hull in August 1979.[19] To Kingsley Amis, Larkin describes the weekend of judging the prize, saying that giving £5,000 to someone 'for some utter ballocks' makes him 'want to do damage'. Larkin cannot help creating a satirical scene, especially to a fellow satirist like Amis: 'Funny crew we were. Ted the Incredible Hulk, Seamus the Gombeen Man, Charles nice enough but'.[20]

Ted Hughes had things to say about Larkin from the 1950s onwards. Writing to his sister Olwyn in June 1958, Hughes mentions that Sylvia Plath recorded some poems for the Poetry Library at Harvard, of which Jack Sweeney was in charge. Ted Hughes explains that among the Harvard students 'Phillip Larkin's & mine were the favourites. Phillip Larkin you'll have heard of. He's a librarian in Hull – about 36 – very good gentle poet'.[21] The Harvard students pair Hughes and Larkin as major talents, and Hughes praises Larkin and his gentleness. It seems, however, that Hughes was sensitive to Larkin's attitude towards Hughes's poetry, as can be seen in a letter of November 1983 to Daniel Weissbort. He tells Weissbort that Faber have recently published a collection of Larkin's reviews and that those at Faber are 'heavily infected, for the moment, with Larkiniosis'.[22] However, in the last letter Ted Hughes wrote to Larkin a month before Larkin died in December 1985, Hughes tells Larkin: 'I hope you're holding ill-health at a distance'.[23] Suggesting that the powers of a local healer, Ted Cornish, might help Larkin, Hughes outlines Cornish's reputation for cures case by case.[24] In life and death, there was, at least in the mind of Hughes, some connection with Larkin. Here was a man suffering, and Hughes extended his hand, realising all the while that his help might be an intrusion or something disconcerting to the cynical Larkin.

A more fruitful poetic relation was with Thom Gunn, who was also at Cambridge a year ahead of Hughes reading English, although at

a different college. As an undergraduate, Gunn was highly regarded as a poet, whereas Hughes published under a pseudonym at that time. When Hughes and Gunn did get to know each other, Gunn had a higher opinion of Hughes than Larkin ever seemed to have had. After two years, Hughes dropped English to study archeology and anthropology. In 1962, when Hughes had two collections published and Gunn had three, Faber brought out a selection of Hughes's and Gunn's poetry together which immediately became an A-level set text. This was very much the publisher's initiative: Faber 'showcasing', as Jonathan Bate puts it, 'the best work of the two Young Turks of English poetry'.[25] Gunn himself has something to say about knowing Hughes, looking back on Cambridge in the 1950s in his autobiography: 'E. J. Hughes of Pembroke was very retiring. I am not sure I even knew him to speak to while I was at Cambridge, though I did know what he looked like. We did not become friends until years later, after he had, as Ted Hughes, published his first book'.[26]

But in a conversation with James Campbell, published eighteen years later, Gunn presents another version of his friendship with Hughes and the timing of it. Gunn seems to have been supportive of, and an advocate for, Hughes. Although Gunn has often been associated with the Movement (which he sees as a reaction against Dylan Thomas, whom he admired), Gunn is also happy that people see him as distinct from the rest of the poets in that group, pointing out that he never met Larkin, for example. Gunn says that critics feel the need to classify a number of poets writing at the same time as a movement, 'except for Ted Hughes, who turned up a bit later'.[27] While stating his own admiration for two of the poets of the Movement, Gunn introduces the subject of Hughes: 'The two poets I do admire from that group – and I did consent to be published in the two volumes of *New Lines*, for example, though I insisted that Ted Hughes was included in the second volume, which is not often remembered – . . . are Donald Davie and Philip Larkin'.[28] Gunn advocated for Hughes whilst also admiring Larkin. Moreover, Gunn answers a question of being linked with Hughes because of their joint *Selected Poems* and about their friendship: 'It's very strange. We were both at Cambridge at the same time – he was a year behind me, but we overlapped for two years – and we were both writing poetry, yet I didn't meet him, I don't know why. Perhaps it was because he didn't publish anything while I was there. He only started publishing in the year after I'd left. We finally met when Faber got us together, in 1960, after the publication of my second book, and possibly his second as well'.[29] As with Larkin, Gunn shows admiration for Hughes

but also distances and distinguishes himself so that he is not part of the Movement or, indeed, has not paired himself with Hughes.

Gunn has two different memories, the first published in 1982 and the other in 2000, about his relation to Hughes. Despite the differences, the common elements are that he did not have conversations with Hughes when they were students at Cambridge but that he subsequently became friends with Hughes. The later memory is more extensive. Campbell asked Gunn whether, after they had met, they remained friends: 'Yes, yes. I liked him very much. I thought he was an admirable man, and of course an admirable poet. I was very excited by his first book, and even more excited by his second. Its tremendous energy delighted me: it was just the kind of thing I was looking for'.[30] Gunn reiterates his admiration of Hughes the man and then Hughes the poet and praises his poetic energy as something necessary for Gunn, whose early poetry has a taut, latent energy of the gay poet not yet 'out'. They corresponded occasionally for the rest of their lives, indicating that, as Gunn says, 'We weren't intimate friends, but you could say that we were professional friends'.[31] The friendship, for Gunn, is based in the profession of poetry since they have been paired by their publisher, for better or worse. Then Gunn turns to Hughes's view of Gunn's poetry: 'Ted Hughes once said, "Thom Gunn's is the poetry of tenderness, not violence." I greatly appreciate that, because I think it's true'.[32] It is clear that Gunn and Hughes were sensitive readers of each other and of each other's poetry.

Of these three contemporaries, the closest friendship and the most intimate appreciation of each other's work was between Hughes and Seamus Heaney. Heaney was younger and Hughes influenced Heaney's poetry to the extent of indirectly revealing to the younger poet approval of the initial subject matter of Heaney's first collections. Hughes and Heaney edited two anthologies of poetry, *The Rattle Bag* (1982) and *The School Bag* (1997), so, as with Gunn, Heaney was paired with Hughes through publication, although in this case it was at their own initiative.[33] Heaney was also a perceptive reader of Hughes's poetry and prose and did not see them as being at odds with each other in the way Hughes himself did, for Hughes thought the prose sapped the poetry.[34] Reviewing Hughes's *Wodwo* in 1967, Heaney had praised Hughes for exploring his limits and the 'quest for the father country of the mind'.[35] Heaney did speak up for Hughes's need to make a living out of writing alone, as opposed to those in secure jobs in universities.[36] Heaney said at Hughes's funeral that no death outside his own family had affected him so much, and almost a decade after Hughes's death, Heaney described Hughes as 'brotherly' in being someone who was

important for Heaney 'to start the writing' and for commending on it.[37] At the memorial at Westminster Abbey, Heaney likened Hughes to Caedmon, the first known English poet.[38]

In the interviews with Dennis O'Driscoll that substitute for an autobiography, Seamus Heaney discusses the influences on his poetry while an undergraduate: 'When I eventually encountered Kavanagh's "Great Hunger" and Ted Hughes's "View of a Pig" and so on, part of the excitement was in their spoken force'.[39] Although Heaney could admire Louis Macneice with a reader's distance, he found Kavanagh and Hughes to plant something that would grow inside him.[40] Heaney says he first encountered Ted Hughes in the pamphlets that the BBC once issued along with their radio broadcasts for schools, *Listening and Writing*.[41] Heaney says that 'Turkeys Observed', the earliest poem in his first collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, was written 'in November or December 1962, partly as a result of reading Ted Hughes's "View of a Pig"'.[42] And when O'Driscoll asks him about the origin of the famous gun/pen image in his poem 'Digging', Heaney says that 'the high-voltage diction of Ted Hughes's work had something to do with it'.[43] The impact of these early readings has a lasting power, Heaney admits: 'If you asked me, I'd probably have to say that *Lupercal* is my own favourite Ted Hughes collection. It's not that I don't admire Ted's work all through. It's just that the original transmissions stay alive in a special way'.[44] Heaney never effaces the importance of Hughes for his own poetry, and when he is asked whether Hughes and he were close friends in the mid-1970s and whether they exchanged work, Heaney gives a detailed answer: 'And that to me was a privilege – a sort of change of life: Ted's work had had an almost magic effect on me in the beginning and to get to know the man responsible was a big thing. And to feel his approval was a precious thing'.[45] There is a personal dimension to the notion of 'approval' here that transcends the craft of poetry whilst including it. Friendship, confidence, creativity and support trump the agon, the burden of the past, the anxiety of influence.[46] When O'Driscoll asks Heaney to compare Larkin and Hughes, Heaney gives Larkin his due for his language – 'serene' and 'sorrowful' – and believes his work will last, like Thomas Gray's 'Elegy', in its 'an ongoing perfect pitch'.[47] Heaney is careful to be balanced here: 'on the other hand' he goes on, Hughes's work has 'more power than pitch, more effulgence than finish, and generally more mana.' After praising Hughes's 'Blakean recklessness', Heaney memorably imagines that Hughes 'mucks into the yard work with Caedmon and then starts to sing creation with him in the cowshed'.[48] But O'Driscoll is curious as to why Heaney dedicated his

poem 'On his Work in the English Tongue' to the memory of Hughes whilst he was still living. Heaney explains how, given a manuscript copy of *Birthday Letters* by somebody at Faber, he felt that he 'was stealing a literary march' and responded by writing the poem immediately before sending it to Hughes.[49] For Heaney, Hughes's book holds its own with late-career sequences such as Wordsworth's 'Ecclesiastical Sonnets' and Lowell's 'Notebook'.[50]

It seems that in these interviews, O'Driscoll senses how important Hughes is to Heaney and asks directly if Hughes was 'your closest friend among poets'. Heaney responds: 'He was the one who fortified me most, the most intuitive about what I worked from and how I worked'.[51] The friendship went beyond the limits of the personal, something elemental perhaps, that Heaney calls 'supra-personal'. One senses this as Heaney describes Hughes's funeral and then the memorial service. The latter, he suggests, brought together the poetic, religious and mythical, Heaney stressing Hughes's language and Englishness, 'the way Ted's language worked in the same register as the liturgy . . . had accommodated the idea of the divine'.[52]

Hughes's complex connection to his contemporaries, Larkin, Gunn and Heaney, reveals how each poet has his own aesthetics and concern with poetry. Through these comparisons and connections we can see Hughes's own distinctiveness more clearly. Although the story of Hughes and his contemporaries is an intricate one, full of feeling and surprises, of praise and dispraise, one nevertheless gains a strong sense of Hughes's personal generosity, genuine concern and unfailing support for quite different fellow writers whilst pursuing his own necessarily distinctive poetic agenda.

Notes

1. '"The lark sizzles in my ear / Like a fuse": Ted Hughes, Dylan Thomas and a Modernist Poetics of Process', in *Ted Hughes, Nature and Culture*, ed. Neil Roberts, Mark Wormald and Terry Gifford (London: Palgrave Macmillan), forthcoming.
2. See Keith Sagar, '"Straight Oxygen": Ted Hughes' Debt to D. H. Lawrence', *Journal of D. H. Lawrence Studies* 2(1) (2009): 71–79.
3. *LTH* 55.
4. Ibid.
5. Elaine Feinstein, *Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001), p. 24.
6. Ibid., p. 23.

7. See Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 81–82.
8. See Daniel Weissbort, *Ted Hughes and Translation* (Nottingham: Richard Hollis, 2011), pp. 7–14.
9. Blake Morrison, *The Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 60.
10. *CP* 802.
11. Philip Larkin, 'To Charles Monteith – 2 March 1978', in *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940–1985*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992), p. 581.
12. Morrison, *The Movement*, p. 192.
13. Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life*, pp. 156–57.
14. Kingsley Amis, 'To Philip Larkin – 21 May 1967', in *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*, ed. Zachary Leader (New York: Hyperion, 2001), p. 680.
15. Philip Larkin, 'To Kingsley Amis – 3 June 1967', in *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin*, p. 396.
16. Philip Larkin, 'To Charles Monteith – 2 June 1975', in *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin*, p. 525.
17. Philip Larkin, 'To Robert Conquest – 15 June 1975', in *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin*, p. 526.
18. Philip Larkin, 'To Anthony Thwaite – 29 January 1978', in *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin*, p. 577.
19. Philip Larkin, 'To Winifred Bradshaw (née Arnott) – 23 August 1979 MS', quoted in *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin*, p. 603, and quoted in James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2014), p. 424.
20. Philip Larkin, 'To Kingsley Amis – 13 January 1981', in *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin*, p. 631.
21. Hughes to Olwyn Hughes, June 1958, *LTH*, p. 124.
22. See Hughes to Daniel Weissbort, 25 November 1983, *LTH*, p. 476, for this quotation and those earlier.
23. Hughes to Philip Larkin, 21 November 1985, *LTH*, p. 502; see also pp. 503–4.
24. Ibid.
25. Jonathan Bate, *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorized Life* (New York: Harper, 2015), p. 179.
26. Thom Gunn, *The Occasions of Poetry: Essays in Criticism and Autobiography*, ed. Clive Wilmer (London: Faber & Faber, 1982), p. 167.
27. Thom Gunn, *Thom Gunn in Conversation with James Campbell* (London: Between the Lines, 2000), pp. 23–24.
28. Gunn, *Thom Gunn in Conversation*, p. 24.
29. Ibid., p. 25.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., pp. 25–26.
32. Ibid., p. 26.
33. For commentary on these joint projects, see Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life*, pp. 15, 168; Seamus Heaney, 'The New Poet Laureate', in

Leonard M. Scigaj, ed., *Critical Essays on Ted Hughes* (New York: G.K. Hall, 1992), pp. 45–46; Roberts, *Ted Hughes*, p. 153; Gifford, *Ted Hughes*, p. 24; Feinstein, *Ted Hughes*, p. 242.

34. Seamus Heaney, St. Jerome Lecture, 'Fretwork: On Translating Beowulf', *In Other Words: The Journal for Literary Translators* (Autumn/Winter) (1999–2000): 23–33.
35. Seamus Heaney, Book Review, *The Northern Review* 1(3) (Autumn 1967): 50–52.
36. Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008), p. 474.
37. Jenny McCartney, Interview with Seamus Heaney, *Sunday Telegraph*, 9 September 2007, in Gifford, *Ted Hughes*, p. 29.
38. Gifford, *Ted Hughes*, p. 142.
39. O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, p. 40.
40. Ibid., p. 50.
41. Ibid., p. 64.
42. Ibid., p. 79.
43. Ibid., p. 82.
44. Ibid., p. 87.
45. Ibid., pp. 189–90.
46. I have in mind the work of W. Jackson Bate and Harold Bloom in this connection.
47. O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, pp. 338–39.
48. Ibid., p. 339.
49. Ibid., pp. 390–91.
50. Ibid., p. 391.
51. Ibid., p. 395.
52. Ibid., p. 474.